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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000715

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [KPAL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SINIORA WISHES PARLIAMENTARY DIALOGUE HAD  
NOT STOPPED; MOVING FORWARD ON HARIRI TRIAL AND ELECTORAL,  
SECURITY, AND ECONOMIC REFORM

REF: A. USUN NEW YORK 423

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 674

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) In a 3/7 meeting with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Siniora regretted the suspension earlier that day of a national dialogue process taking place in the Parliament. The talks made progress while they lasted, he argued, particularly in the area of bringing under control an armed Palestinian presence outside the refugee camps. Siniora suggested that recent statements made by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt -- who earlier left the parliamentary dialogue table to make a visit to Washington -- had been unhelpful, whether they were justified or not. Siniora, expressing satisfaction with the GOL-UN/OLA consultations, said he would consult with a legal team returning from UN Headquarters in New York on next steps towards a trial of former Prime Minister Hariri's assassins. He would soon call in the commission he appointed to reform the electoral law to review their work. He would also re-launch efforts in security sector reform, saying they were directly relevant to the parliamentary dialogue he hopes will start again soon. As Siniora nodded, his chief of staff suggested that a Core Group preparatory meeting for a "Beirut I" conference take place concurrently with April's IMF/World Bank annual conference in Washington. End summary.

DIALOGUE SUSPENDED: BLAME WALID

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[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador and emboff called on Prime Minister Siniora, who was joined by chief of staff Mohamad Chatah and political advisor Rola Nouredine, at the Grand Serail on March 7. It had been several hours since the announcement that the parliamentary dialogue talks organized by Speaker of Parliament Berri had been suspended (septel). Siniora attributed the breakdown to statements made by his "March 14 forces" ally, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, in Washington the day before. "You should have discouraged him from going" to the United States, Siniora chided the Ambassador.

13. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that Jumblatt's trip had been planned some time before the parliamentary dialogue talks were ever proposed, and that the USG would have understood had Jumblatt changed his plans to remain in Beirut for the talks. In any event, what Jumblatt had said in Washington was nothing new -- he has made many of the same points (including about Hizballah, Syria, and Iran) in recent television interviews, as well as in his fiery speech for the one-year anniversary commemoration of Prime Minister Hariri's assassination. What Jumblatt said in Washington was, in fact, milder than some of his other statements.

MAYBE WALID IS RIGHT, BUT...

14. (C) "I know," Siniora answered. However, it had been agreed previously that the "top man" of each group be represented at the table. As a result, there had been "disappointment" that Jumblatt was not present. Those familiar with Jumblatt saw his sudden absence from the table as one of his usual "tactics." Nasrallah had insisted that he was not breaking off dialogue, but would appoint someone else to represent him until Jumblatt returned. Speaker Berri did not agree to this, however. In any event, "the dialogue is continuing," and participants would re-convene on March 13, following Jumblatt's return, according to Siniora.

15. (C) Siniora agreed that Jumblatt had not said anything new in Washington. However, he had unhelpfully "bombarded," from a continent away, a meeting at which his own political allies were present. Jumblatt's insinuations that some of the other participants at the table were effectively "Syrians" and "enemies" had not been helpful, nor had his suggestion that the talks were "a hopeless cause." "Probably he is right," Siniora said of Jumblatt, but "this is not the way to deal with people."

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LEBANON LOSING ON THE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY FRONT

16. (C) Siniora worried that Jumblatt's stance risked losing his government further allies abroad. Lebanon had already "lost the battle inside Syria." Now, "we are about to lose the battle inside the Arab world," with Arab governments and media using Jumblatt's example to make the case that it was Lebanon, not Syria, that was the offender. "Our case needs to be presented the right way," he said.

TALKS WERE GOOD WHILE THEY LASTED

17. (C) Siniora suggested that the talks had been good while they lasted, with a level of "civilized" discussion that, he claimed, almost defied the imagination. Participants had talked with each other "clearly," "softly," and with "a great deal of responsibility." As to the dynamics of individual participants, Michel Aoun had had little to say about topics other than the presidency, but was clearly "showing his love affair with Hizballah." Hizballah was "somehow" reciprocating. Samir Ja'ja', who had made inflammatory statements prior to the beginning of the talks, had been "excellent" once inside the talks.

18. (C) Siniora said the talks had seen progress on some important issues. For example, Hizballah had agreed that the presence of armed Palestinians and Palestinian weapons outside the refugee camps would be subject to the provision of the 1989 Ta'ef Agreement requiring disbandment of all militias, and that a deadline for this could be set as early as six months from now. While called Ta'ef, this was clearly a step toward UNSCR 1559 implementation.

19. (C) In return, Hizballah -- to "show it got something" in

return -- had bizarrely yet harmlessly demanded a prohibition on the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon ("tawteen"), one that would require a unanimous vote in Parliament to overturn. The Druze Aridi -- Siniora criticized him for being "inflexible" -- made an equally bizarre objection, claiming that participants in the talks would have to consult with the Maronite Patriarch (comment: whose opposition to "tawteen" is well-known and unconditional) before agreeing to this.

GAINS NOT LOST... NOT YET  
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¶10. (C) Siniora said the suspension of talks did not mean that this incremental progress toward controlling Palestinian militias had been lost. "We have made inroads in clarifying matters," he said. At the same time, he worried about what might be a tense interim between the March 7 suspension of talks and the presumed re-start of talks following Jumbatt's return to Lebanon. "Someone will make a speech," Siniora said, then "someone else will make a statement in response," and quickly the situation would get "complicated" and less suitable for dialogue.

SARG WILL DO NOTHING TO HELP  
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¶11. (C) Siniora noted that Nasrallah had made an unpublicized trip to Damascus on March 5. Not long after that, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad had "started attacking" the Lebanese and their parliamentary dialogue effort with an inflammatory March 6 speech. Siniora suggested that this was not a coincidental chain of events. Asked if any of the participants raised the subject of Nasrallah's Damascus trip, Siniora said they had not.

¶12. (C) Given the SARG's apparent lack of interest in the parliamentary dialogue succeeding, and given its disturbing link to one of the participants, "We should have been more careful," Siniora said. "Okay, he can attack Bashar," said Siniora, referring to Jumblatt. However, it had not been helpful for Jumblatt to criticize Hizballah, a participant in the talks. "This break could have been avoided," he maintained.

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¶13. (C) Siniora asked, "Do you think the Syrians were happy to see us talking?" The SARG, he asserted, "will do everything possible to keep us from meeting again." His government was already receiving "messages" from pro-SARG Palestinian rejectionist groups to this effect. Israel was apparently "not happy" with the dialogue process, either, according to Siniora, who pointed to Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace made while the talks were in progress.

HARIRI ASSASSINATION TRIBUNAL  
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¶14. (C) Siniora acknowledged that the GOL's two-member legal team was returning from consultations in New York after having agreed to trying suspects in the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri in a Special Court for Lebanon established by a UN-Lebanese treaty ratified by the Lebanese Parliament (Ref A). He expressed satisfaction with the talks. Now that the team has returned to Beirut, Siniora's government, "we will discuss and make the necessary changes to our approach," Siniora said. (Note: The GOL's original preference was for an international tribunal set up by a Chapter VII Security Council resolution.)

¶15. (C) Asked about the change in approach from what the GOL team took to New York and what they brought back, Siniora said that, as a result of the parliamentary dialogue talks, the question of a trial for Hariri's assassins was no longer problematic. Of more concern now were the financial

implications of the trial. It was a "major issue," said Siniora, who suggested that the GOL might have to start a fund-raising campaign.

#### ELECTORAL LAW

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¶16. (C) Siniora acknowledged that members of the national commission he formed to draft a new electoral law were having trouble reaching agreement on the key issue of electoral districts. Beyond the commission, a number of political and religious leaders and groups were actively lobbying for very different electoral frameworks. Siniora denied that the situation was "a mess," saying it was to be expected that participants in the debate would seek their own preferences.

¶17. (C) Siniora asked, rhetorically, "how to reconcile" all these different proposed solutions to the electoral law question. Answering himself, he said, "You've got to come up with creative ideas." With that in mind, he pointed out that the Ta'ef Agreement calls for electoral districts to be drawn along the boundaries of the "mohafazah" (governorate), and that "the world is moving toward proportionality."

¶18. (C) Siniora claimed that he and electoral reform commission member Nawaf Salam had, the night before, convinced Sa'ad Hariri of the superiority of proportionality to Lebanon's existing first-past-the-post basis for deciding parliamentary elections. (Comment: As the majority leader in Parliament, Hariri could be expected to have reservations about changing a law, unpopular as it might be, that got him where he is today.) Among other things, Hizballah's and the Amal Movement's domination of those seats in Parliament reserved for Shi'as would end under proportionality, according to Siniora.

¶19. (C) Siniora suggested that Salam's proposed "two-tier" system (Ref B) could be a possible solution, as combines small districts with MPs elected on a first-past-the-post basis with governorate-sized districts where MPs are elected on a proportional basis. In any case, he had directed Salam to convene the commission members in a meeting, "so I can see what they have done." It was all part of his role of being a "firefighter," Siniora chuckled.

#### SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

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¶20. (C) Asked by the Ambassador, Siniora confirmed that he intended to work on reform of the security sector. For example, he had intended since coming to office to establish

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an office responsible for coordination among the governments' various security forces. The absence -- since the July 2005 attempt on his life -- of the defense minister had been a "major obstacle" in making progress.

¶21. (C) Now, in response to indications of international support, and also to the February 5 riots in Beirut's Ashrafieh neighborhood, Siniora intended to re-launch an effort to "reconcile" the two largest organizations in the security sector, the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces. Siniora said he wanted to see the UK do more of what it has already done in the field of security sector reform.

¶22. (C) "What gives this more importance," Siniora continued, is that a "strategy for defending Lebanon" is a future topic for discussion in the national parliamentary dialogue. Participants had to identify the national defense implications of fully implementing the Ta'ef Agreement (Siniora started to say UNSCR 1559, but corrected himself), and they had to be specific. Importantly, Hizballah had indicated that it was ready to participate in such a discussion.

## CORE GROUP NEXT STEPS

123. (C) During the meeting, Mohamad Chatah told the Ambassador that the government was working on another briefing to Core Group ambassadors on its economic reform plan. This would likely be scheduled for the week of March 13, allowing time to brief cabinet ministers on the latest iteration of the plan beforehand.

124. (C) Chatah proposed that IMF/World Bank annual conference in Washington, D.C., in late April be used as a venue for a preparatory meeting for the eventual Core Group "Beirut I" conference. It would be more practical to take advantage of this event, during which all Core Group members would be present, than to schedule a meeting at another time, and in another place, in April. Also, it would still allow for the "Beirut I" conference to take place in May. Siniora nodded that he agreed.

## COMMENT

125. (C) We believe that the proposal to hold a Core Group preparatory meeting concurrent with the IMF/World Bank conference makes sense, and recommend that the Department and other involved Washington agencies agree to this, given that all the players will be assembled anyway.

126. (C) As for the "blame Walid" game currently going on, we think that the national dialogue would have reached an impasse by this point anyway. Had Jumblatt been at the table, the dialogue could have broken down permanently, over any number of issues. But, with Jumblatt absent, he became a convenient excuse for a temporary, and useful, suspension. We hope that the March 14 participants in particular will use this suspension to coordinate the positions among themselves.

Now that we know that Nasrallah made a secret trip to Damascus last Sunday, we are sure that he received marching orders. The March 14 participants in the dialogue will need to build unity in their ranks to prevent Hizballah from playing one off the other.

FELTMAN